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*Analyzing failure, understanding success:*

*A research strategy for explaining gender equality  
adoption*

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ANALYSING FAILURE, UNDERSTANDING SUCCESS: A RESEARCH STRATEGY FOR  
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# ANALYZING FAILURE, UNDERSTANDING SUCCESS

## A RESEARCH STRATEGY FOR EXPLAINING GENDER EQUALITY POLICY ADOPTION

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### **Abstract**

One of the major challenges within feminist political science is to understand under what conditions gender equality policies are adopted. This article addresses the issue from a methodological point of view: it suggests a research strategy for systematically analyzing “failed” attempts of policy adoption, that is, reform attempts that do not become a law or regulation. The research strategy includes two considerations that should be taken into account when selecting unsuccessful cases for empirical scrutiny. We illustrate the strategy by making use of a failed reform attempt on the Swedish labor market: the individualization of the parental leave system.

Key words: Gender equality, policy, adoption, failure, case selection, Sweden, parental leave

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One of the key features of feminist political science is its ambition to generate insights that may be used to pursue political change (Krook and Mackay, 2010, see also Hawkesworth, 1994, Mazur, 2002). This transformative character of feminist approaches within political science brings with it a search for explicit tools that may help feminist political actors push through gender equality policy reforms. As a consequence, the question of under which conditions gender equality policies are adopted has been a focus area of feminist political science for quite some time.

Often for good reasons, the literature has tended to focus on “successful” cases, that is, on policy proposals that have resulted in policy adoption and thus in policy change. Acknowledging the many ways in which women can be agents of change in patriarchal societies is, of course, important and valuable. As Mazur puts it in a comparative study of feminist policy formation, “In examining cases of feminist policy success, the constellation of state and society actors involved with feminist policy can learn more about the specific ingredients for success within their policy niche” (2002, 198). However, in this article we argue that the desire to understand “what works” runs the risk of being counter-productive if and when it leads researchers into selection bias. By largely leaving out the systematic study of unsuccessful – or “failed” – attempts at policy formation, the research field has been unable to provide a complete understanding of the facilitators for the adoption of gender equality policies. The focus on successful cases limits opportunities for researchers to identify the circumstances under which gender equality policies are and are not adopted. This, in turn, generates incomplete theory building. In addition, it risks undermining the very transformative project it emanates from by generating ineffective tools and recommendations for change.

Building on the results of earlier research, this article aims at pushing the research field one step forward by outlining a research strategy that takes into account unsuccessful attempts at policy formation. More specifically, the article presents a strategy for how to identify unsuccessful cases of gender equality policy adoption that are fruitful for empirical analysis. This strategy is exemplified with a potential case from the Swedish labor market: a policy proposal to make the parental leave system more individualized. Thus, the main contribution of the article is of a methodological character.<sup>4</sup>

The theoretical benefit of adding unsuccessful cases to the picture is simple: an explicit focus on such cases makes it possible to answer the crucial question of whether the factors identified as conducive to gender equality reform really are generally missing in unsuccessful reform attempts. Without paying close attention to unsuccessful cases, and thus without having variation in the outcome of reform initiatives, it is difficult to draw conclusions about facilitators for feminist policy change (c.f. King et al., 1994, Geddes, 1990). To put it differently, we need to incorporate the study of “failures” to better understand success. For instance, if beneficial factors for the adoption of gender equality policies are present in cases where a policy proposal is brought up and debated on the political agenda but left without action, then there are reasons to downplay the role of these factors for gender equality reform. In such cases, the community of feminist scholars will have to add other explanations to the picture, and feminist political actors will have to look for additional items to put in their political toolbox.

The article proceeds as follows: First, we review the literature on the adoption of gender equality policies and point to its emphasis on successful cases or, at least, its lack of explicit

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<sup>4</sup> In other words, although we believe the case presented has potential to increase our knowledge about what factors explain gender equality policy adoption, the purpose here is not to conduct such an empirical analysis of the case.

comparisons with cases where policy debates have not resulted in policy adoption. Second, we present our argument as to why scholars should also engage in analysis of unsuccessful cases, and we discuss and present a strategy for what should be considered when selecting empirical cases of unsuccessful – or “failed” – attempts at gender equality policy formation. Third, and in direct relation to this discussion, we illustrate this strategy with a reform proposal concerning the Swedish labor market: individualized parental leave. Finally, we conclude by summing up the argument and by discussing its implications for research on gender equality policy.

### ***Studies of ‘feminist success in reshaping public policy’***

In an early overview of the field of gender equality policy, Hawkesworth shows that the study of “feminist success in reshaping public policy” (1994, 99) has been the main concern of feminist policy studies since the 1970s. Early on, feminist research understandably sought to compensate for women’s past invisibility in shaping public policy. There was also a strong desire to demonstrate the potential for change if women would only become engaged in politics. Also, in more recent research, understanding the circumstances under which gender equality policies are adopted represents one of the major challenges within feminist political science. A growing body of literature has addressed the issue in the last 30 years and has contributed many important and interesting insights about the role of state feminists (e.g. Chappell, 2002, Lovenduski, 2005, Outshoorn and Kantola, 2007, Stetson and Mazur, 1995), women’s movement activists (e.g. Banaszak, 1996, Beckwith, 2001, Bergman, 2004, Franceschet, 2004, Gelb, 1989, Weldon, 2002), members of parliament (e.g. Beckwith, 2007, Bratton, 2005, Bratton and Ray, 2002, Celis et al., 2008, Childs, 2004, Reingold, 2000, Swers, 2001, Thomas, 1991), women in the executive (e.g. Atchison and Down, 2009, Bauer and

Tremblay, 2011), and alliances among these actors (e.g. Halsaa, 1998, Holli, 2008, Htun, 2003, Woodward, 2003) in contributing to changing policy in a feminist direction.

As the normative aim of feminist studies is to accomplish change, it is perhaps not surprising that there has been a bias towards studying successful cases, that is, reform processes where feminist policy change has been achieved. In general, cases are still selected with the aim of understanding why feminist political activists have been successful in achieving policy change rather than why they have failed. The few quantitative studies that have been done on the subject may be considered exceptions. As an example, in a study of the policy impact of feminist civil society Weldon looks at all fifty U.S. states and endeavors, through regression analysis, to distinguish the factors promoting government action on violence against women from the ones that do not spur such action (Weldon, 2004). Any regression analysis of policy adoption requires the inclusion of both successful and unsuccessful cases, as variation in the dependent variable is needed<sup>5</sup>. However, in quantitative studies the explicit focus is generally on understanding the role of women's movements in promoting change and improvement, rather than theorizing about maintenance of the status quo or non-action on the part of the government. In an earlier study, Weldon conducts a cross-national comparison of the variation in government response to violence against women. Cases without any response at all are included in the first analysis. Interestingly, however, when Weldon picks some countries for a qualitative in-depth study, the most successful cases are chosen (Weldon, 2002).

The lack of focus on unsuccessful cases is even more accentuated in case studies employing methodologies such as process tracing. This does not mean that failed policy attempts are neglected; on the contrary, failure is generally a possible analytical outcome on the extreme

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<sup>5</sup> The argument of this article is therefore primarily of relevance for qualitative studies.

negative end of a scale of degrees of success (see e.g. Lovenduski, 2005, Mazur, 2002). It has even been claimed that “feminist researchers on the whole tend to belong to the category of people who are more likely to note that a glass is half empty than half full. Being committed to social change and gender equity, improvements are never fast enough and are often thought to hide a snake in the grass” (Outshoorn and Kantola, 2007, 284). Despite this pessimistic view on the possibility of progress, however, status quo or feminist failure is seldom specifically and explicitly contrasted to success in policy analyses. For instance, Gelb, in a pioneering work comparing the United Kingdom, the United States, and Sweden, selected the cases because they were “similar regarding women’s rights” (Gelb, 1989, 3), and she was mainly interested in the variation in feminist impact on gender equality policies. In an influential anthology on state feminism in different countries, the editors claim that the volume shows that the existence of a strong women’s movement is conducive to gender equality policy adoption. The failed attempts to introduce gender equality policies are, however, left without much attention and at the same time it is stated that cases such as the U.S. show that “lively movement activism is no guarantee” (Outshoorn and Kantola, 2007, 285). Similarly, Lovenduski (2005) concludes in a comparative study that women’s movements were successful in all countries but Belgium and France; however, there is no further examination or discussion about what distinguishes the processes in these two countries from those in the other countries. The first important point to be made here is thus that failure, even when it is identified by researchers, is not given a lot of attention. Success is still regarded as the interesting outcome in terms of analysis and scrutiny.

Second, the theoretical and analytical focus is, from the outset, directed towards factors that explain success rather than failure. For example, in the ambitious, extensive, and important research undertaken by the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS), the main focus is on understanding the impact of women’s movements on a wide array of

different policy sectors (e.g. McBride et al., 2010). This also has implications for the research design in general and for case selection in particular. RNGS-related projects often ask participants to select policy processes where the debates are interesting and engaging, where women's movements are already involved, and where there is a specific output of some kind, such as a law (see e.g. Lovenduski, 2005). Thus, policies are often selected for study because they are interesting as such from a feminist policy perspective, and the intention of the researcher is not to explain the outcome. For instance, when Verloo conducts a text analysis of the Council of Europe's report about mainstreaming, she does so not to determine why the report came about, but to determine if this central and important document responds to theoretical criteria of displacement and empowerment (Verloo, 2005). Given the premises of these research endeavors, a focus on failed cases is simply not called for.

Third, when failure has been studied and highlighted in policy analyses, the focus has more often been on the effectiveness of policies already in place than on explaining policy adoption as such. In other words, the focus has commonly been on the policy implementation stage of the policy process rather than on the pre-adoption stages (c.f. Anderson, 2011). In an analysis of gender mainstreaming, for instance, Benschop and Verloo chose to analyze human resource management at the Ministry of the Flemish Community in Belgium because the preconditions for successful gender mainstreaming were considered to be relatively favorable in that case. The focus of the analysis was then on examining why the effects of the implemented mainstreaming were not as beneficial as they could have been (Benschop and Verloo, 2006). Thus, the main objective behind studying policies has been to determine whether nominally feminist policies have actually had the intended effects, or whether the effects have been different in different policy areas (see e.g. Mazur, 2002).

Our critique of the literature on gender equality policy is, of course, inspired by the large influential methodological literature about the problem of selection bias in case study research

seeking to establish causality in social sciences (e.g. Mill, 1967 [1843], Skocpol, 1979, 1984, Geddes, 1990, King et al., 1994, George and Bennett, 2005). The strictest version of this argument is represented by King, Keohane, and Verba (KKV) who, in their influential and much-debated book *Designing Social Inquiry*, claim that when “observations are selected on the basis of a particular value of the dependent variable, nothing whatsoever can be learned about the causes of the dependent variable without taking into account other instances when the dependent variable takes on other values” (King et al., 1994, 129). This would imply that individual studies of successful cases of gender equality policy adoption do not contribute greatly to our knowledge. We do not subscribe to such a strict view. We argue that KKV have too narrow a viewpoint when their point of departure for selection criteria is always the individual study and never the field as a whole. Laitin has usefully made this point, adding that “if the community of scientists, rather than the individual researcher, is the unit of evaluation, some of the selection problems that King, Keohane, and Verba identify in particular studies would be partially washed away” (Laitin, 1995).

Thus, our critique of previous research on gender equality policy adoption is not directed to individual contributions for ignoring the analysis of why proposed courses of action fail to be adopted: their aims have simply not necessitated such a focus. They have mainly aimed to describe success, to analyze important cases of feminist policy, and to understand why adopted policy does not always reach the intended results. The analytical frameworks of most studies do not include a systematic comparison between feminist policy proposals that are adopted and those that are not. However, for the field as a whole it is a problem that despite all the accumulated knowledge about feminist policy, we are still not able to identify the factors that are required to bring about gender equal policy change. What is conducive for feminist policy adoption is only implicitly compared to the cases in which the women’s movements have failed to have a law enacted. Thereby, feminist failure in policy adoption is

under-theorized and our knowledge about the causes of successes and failures remains limited.

The lack of focus on policy proposals that fail to be adopted is not restricted to feminist research. Various mainstream policy studies, too, have pointed to the methodological problem of a selection bias towards successful cases. As early as the 1960s, Bachrach and Baratz called for a closer investigation of the dynamics of non-decision-making and of the behavior and strategies of status-quo-oriented political actors (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). Although the various stages of the policy process have been thoroughly scrutinized in the subsequent decades (Sabatier, 1991), including analysis of the *loss* of agenda status (Anderson, 2011, Baumgartner, 2001), the propensity to emphasize successful cases is still highlighted in the literature. For instance, scholars on the role of ideas in politics have pointed out that “the literature is ripe with case studies that show that a particular idea was important in explaining different outcomes [but] there has been much less work that has tried to discern systematically what differentiates victorious ideas from their rivals” (Mehta, 2011, 26). Also, at the post-adoption stages of the policy process, there are indications of too great a focus on success stories, such as in research on welfare reform (Schram and Soss, 2001). However, nowhere is the problem likely to be as pertinent as in feminist policy research, where the methodological problem of leaving out failed cases runs the risk of obstructing the very political goals of the field.

## *Analyzing failed policy adoption: a research strategy*

Explaining failed policy adoption and maintenance of the status quo may seem less attractive than explaining change and success. However, the argument we want to make here is that analyzing failure is essential to understanding success: a closer examination of policy options that fail to be adopted might bring about new explanations for gender equality policy adoption, nuance established accounts, or simply confirm conventional wisdom. Thus, based on our literature review, we argue that the field of feminist policy analysis as a whole needs to address at least two issues. The first issue concerns the need to explicitly distinguish between the contexts and strategies that tend to lead to successful policy adoption and the factors that have proven less effective in the feminist struggle for policy change. The presence of strong women's movements, for instance, is often taken for granted, and their importance constitutes the starting points of many studies. We argue that we should treat their presence and importance as an open empirical question. We cannot be certain that strong women's movements have not also been present in reform attempts that were less successful. If, indeed, they have been present in cases where proposed courses of action have failed to be adopted, it means that a commonly mentioned prerequisite for successful feminist policy reform is not, in fact, directly causally related to gender equality policy adoption, and we will have to search for new or additional explanatory factors. Including the study of failed cases of policy adoption would perhaps not primarily enable us to discard explanatory factors. What it would help us to do, however, is to bring about a nuanced assessment of the preconditions necessary for gender equality policy success. It may be that women's movements require specific favorable institutional settings to have an impact, and thus, regardless of their strength, only make a difference when such distinct opportunity structures are in place. In other words, we need to take into account a possible interaction between actors for change and the institutional context in which they operate (c.f. Htun, 2003, Htun and Weldon, 2010).

Second, the research field needs to theorize about and gain a deeper understanding of what constitutes failed policy adoption and how it comes about, looking at whether there are certain common denominators within the group of failed policy proposals. For instance, there are suggestions of a more theoretical character that reforms that more directly challenge male power will meet stronger resistance (e.g. Hobson, 2003, Lindvert, 2007); however, such theoretical hypotheses have rarely been subjected to empirical scrutiny (see however Htun and Weldon, 2010 where they present a research agenda with the specific purpose of empirically examining under which circumstances governments promote women's rights).

Here, we elaborate on a new research agenda, which takes on the challenge of explaining gender equality policy adoption. This implies selecting cases based on the actual outcome, in other words, specifically and from the outset including cases of failed policy adoption. We need to establish that the factors identified as important for success are not present in reform attempts that never came about. Increased knowledge about what works and what does not can also guide researchers and policy actors seeking to influence policy.

#### *SELECTING UNSUCCESSFUL CASES*

How do we identify empirical cases of unsuccessful attempts at policy adoption that are fruitful for analysis? This is indeed not a straightforward task. There are certain methodological considerations concerning case selection that need to be taken into account when analyzing “failed” attempts at policy adoption rather than successful reform attempts. It is generally not very difficult to identify a reform that was carried out or to argue that we need to understand how and why it came about. It is much more of a challenge to identify a reform that might have come about but did not, and to try to understand why policies were not adopted. Thus, analyzing change is generally more straightforward than analyzing failure to change from the status quo.

Two considerations are of particular importance when it comes to identifying and selecting suitable unsuccessful cases with a potential to generate as much insight as possible, not just about the failure in question, but about the reasons for success in other instances. We need to identify cases of failure that can teach us more about the causes of success; thus, it is imperative that the failed cases that we study can be compared to successful cases. Therefore, we first need to carefully *specify the failure* – what exactly it was that failed and at what point in time. This implies identifying a window of opportunity for gender equality gains, or a critical juncture (c.f. Collier and Collier, 1991, Mahoney, 2002). Mahoney defines a critical juncture as a “choice point[s] when a particular option is adopted among two or more alternatives” (Mahoney, 2002, 4). When the focus is on failed policy *adoption*, such a critical juncture can only arise when the issue in question is *already on the political agenda*; thus the issue should be at the policy formulation or policy adoption stage of the policy process (Anderson, 2011, Sabatier, 1991). In other words, we should concern ourselves with issues that “receive serious consideration at any given time by public policy-makers” (Anderson, 2011, 90), and thus with reform attempts that stand a reasonable chance of being successful. We therefore need to analyze issues that have generated clear and identifiable reform proposals within the context of the formal policy process. These include, for instance, proposals generated by public investigations or inquiries. Quite naturally, “failed policy adoption” does not apply to the policy implementation and policy evaluation stages. And evidently, specifying failure also means that we will need to focus on policy proposals that have not become laws or regulations but that rather, for reasons that researchers should attempt to unveil, have become stalled in the policy process<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the logic presented here pertains to explanations of policy adoption. When the focus is elsewhere and the purpose is to explain failure at another stage in the policy process, the criteria applied will of course have to be adapted to suit that particular stage. For instance, if the purpose is to explain agenda-setting, we may need to show that there has been a suggestion from a gender equality

The second consideration relates to the overall critique of this article: if our goal is to better understand what facilitates success, we should not analyze either successful or unsuccessful cases in isolation. It is by *explicit comparison* of comparable cases that facilitating and constraining factors for success become apparent. Regarding research design and analysis, such a comparison can be achieved in the design of the study itself, in the form of a traditional Mill's Method of Difference (see e.g. George and Bennett, 2005), in which two similar cases with different dependent variables are the focus of empirical scrutiny in search of the one independent variable that explains the difference. Considering, however, that the field is already rich in case studies of successful cases of policy reform, it may suffice to make sure that there is a comparable literature on successful cases of which explicit use can be made (c.f. Laitin, 1995). Our main point here is not to argue for one of the two strategies, but to encourage researchers to select an unsuccessful case that has a successful counterpart to which it can be compared. This includes taking into account the fact that all gender policy issues are not alike. The group in fact involves a multitude of issues, actors and conflicts. A strategy relevant for a certain type of issue may not be relevant for another. A theoretical typology of different gender equality issues, such as the one presented by Htun and Weldon (2010), can help us identifying comparable cases. Apart from being theory driven, research in this field will need to balance the cumulative experiences collected from a wide range of literature on feminist policy reform with the need for contextual sensitivity. It is highly likely that explanations of success and failure are, at least in part, context specific. What works in one country may well be unthinkable as a strategy in another. This is what Htun and Weldon label *agent-context interaction*: “*Different actions have different powers and effects in different contexts. [...] We argue that state capacity, institutional legacies, vulnerability to international pressure, and degree of democracy are powerful contextual influences on sex*

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actor in order to be able to argue that the reform attempts stood a reasonable chance of being successful. If we are studying implementation, we of course need to demonstrate that the law has been adopted, etc.

*equality policy. These factors affect the priorities and effectiveness of the advocates of change. They shape the ways policies are framed and their “fit” within a particular context”*(Htun and Weldon, 2010, 208). Thus, future research on feminist policy reform initiatives should make explicit comparisons with *comparable* successful and unsuccessful cases.

### ***An illustrative example: The failed attempt to individualize parental leave in Sweden***

Here, we illustrate how the two methodological considerations apply to real-world political issues. We do so by making use of a failed reform attempt to improve gender equality in the Swedish labor market: *individualization of the parental leave system* (i.e. half of the paid parental leave for each parent). As Htun and Weldon (2010) point out, there are different types of gender equality policies. They also argue that it is possible that different types require different strategies and because they address different types of societal problems. Htun and Weldon are right in pointing out that there may very well be different causal stories behind policy adoption of different types of gender equality policies. We find no reason to believe, however, that our argument hinges on the *type* of policy. Including an analysis of failed cases is important for anyone with an explanatory agenda, and although the example with parental leave in Sweden below is what Htun and Weldon would label a non-doctrinal policy (as opposed to a doctrinal policy that challenges religious doctrines or cultural traditions) that addresses class inequalities (rather than empowering women as a group) (Htun and Weldon, 2010, 209-211), we have no reason to believe that our framework would not be as relevant for doctrinal policy or a policy addressing women as a group. The typology launched by Htun and Weldon is, of course, on the other hand, very important when it comes to indentifying comparable cases, as argued above. Our purpose here is not to test any hypotheses about why

this particular case ultimately failed, but to demonstrate that our methodological considerations can indeed be useful tools to identify and select cases for study.

Swedish parental leave policies are already among the most generous in the world both in terms of time and reimbursement (80% of income, up to a certain amount), and they are also constructed in a gender-equal way, making it (de jure) equally possible for fathers and mothers to combine family life with work. However, in 2009, men still only used 22% of the child allowance days, while women used the remaining 78%. This is mirrored by a labor market in which women, although they participate to a large extent, are much more likely than men to work part-time. Partly as a consequence, women also spend more time doing unpaid work than men do, and this pattern is particularly accentuated in families with small children (StatisticsSweden, 2010). The uneven use of parental leave has often been seen as one of the reasons behind the persistent gender inequalities in the Swedish labor market. The struggle for policy measures to encourage men to use more parental leave has been going on for more than 30 years, but with limited success. One way of making sure that men become more involved in the care of their children would be to individualize parental leave, that is, to tie it to the individual parent and not to the couple/family. Different terms, like “father’s quota,” “ear-marking,” and “individualization,” have been used to describe this phenomenon. Many Swedish feminists see individualized parental leave policies as the key to promoting gender equality in general. In contrast to most other gender equality policies, this kind of policy would put pressure on men to change their behavioral patterns that, indirectly, give them advantages on the labor market (Bergqvist, 1999).

The individualization of parental leave legislation has been a subject of intense debate since the 1990s. In the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it reached the formal political agenda, when the government set up an inquiry committee. Such committees could either have representation of all the political parties represented in the parliament, or be directed by an

expert on the topic (such as a senior public administration official or a scholar). The committee on parental leave was headed by a Social Democratic politician, Karl Petter Thorwaldsson. The inquiries are the first crucial part of the formal legislative process, which precedes the government's policy proposal process and the legislative work carried out in the legislature. Usually, the conclusions of an inquiry guide the government's further actions; that is, the government usually proceeds in line with the committee's recommendations. A clear and identifiable proposal about increased individualization of parental leave can be identified in the conclusions made by the parental leave inquiry in 2005. The inquiry resulted in a recommendation to proceed with regulation. It recommended a division of the parental leave system into three separate parts: five months earmarked for the mother, five months earmarked for the father, and five months that could be freely divided by the parents. The suggestion certainly does not represent a full-fledged individualization, where half of the time is allotted to each parent, but it is clearly a step towards individualization (SOU2005:73, 2005). We can conclude that the issue of individualized parental leave had reached the public agenda and the attempt to push through a reform stood a reasonable chance of being successful. Here we have thus identified a window of opportunity for gender equality gains.

However, despite the clear recommendations, the Social Democratic government decided not to proceed with the legislative processes. The report of the parental leave inquiry came out just before the Social Democratic Party Congress in 2005. The Social Democratic Women's Association and the Social Democratic Youth Organization had been proponents of such a reform – the leader of the Social Democratic Women's Association, Nalin Pekgul, in particular. However, right before the Congress opened, the then-Prime Minister and leader of the Social Democrats, Göran Persson, told the media that there would not be any "quotas" in the parental leave legislation, despite the inquiry committee's recommendations (Brors, 2005). The signal to the Congress was obvious and the women's association decided not to

push the issue further. The time was not right for radical changes, since general elections were coming up within a year after the Congress. As a result, the reform proposal was put on hold.

As for possible comparisons, the earlier successful introductions of earmarked months for each parent, the so-called “daddy months,” constitute possible comparable cases. There is an already existing literature on these cases (e.g. Klinth, 2002, Lammi-Taskula, 2006, Leira, 2006). The purpose of these reforms was to encourage fathers to spend more time at home with their children while allowing mothers to go back to work earlier. Although not as radical as the reform proposal of individualization, the earmarked months were nevertheless highly debated and controversial reforms when undertaken – especially the first earmarked month. This reform was introduced in 1994 by a center-right government, whereas the second earmarked month was introduced in 2002 by a Social Democratic government. The fact that both a left-leaning and a more center-rightist government have introduced “daddy months” makes it even more interesting to explicitly compare why these reforms were possible when a more far-reaching individualization was not.

## ***Conclusion***

The inherently transformative project that feminist policy research constitutes can and should be seen as a strength of the field. Not only does it make research results directly relevant for practitioners, it is also a strong driving force behind the attempts at constantly improving and developing the field. With the explicit purpose of strengthening both the field of gender equality policy research and the feminist political project, this article has addressed the question of under what conditions gender equality reforms come about. Its main contribution is of a methodological character: it adds a new perspective to the field of feminist policy studies by highlighting the need to systematically analyze “failed” attempts at policy adoption, that is, reform attempts that do not become a law or regulation. We have presented

at least two reasons as to why a closer analysis of failure is important for understanding success. First, we cannot be sure that the factors identified as conducive to gender equality reform really are missing in unsuccessful reform attempts unless we pay explicit attention to the latter as well. Second, by paying closer theoretical attention to failed reform attempts, it is possible to assess whether these are the results of a general absence of the factors that have been held to generate change, or if “failure” is caused by factors that have not been brought up in work on successful cases. In the analysis, we propose two methodological considerations that need to be taken into account when selecting unsuccessful cases for empirical scrutiny. To illustrate how these considerations facilitate case selection we look at a failed reform attempt in the Swedish labor market: the individualization of the parental leave system.

The analysis has important implications for the research agenda on feminist public policy. It calls attention to the need for a more methods-driven selection of policy reform initiatives. If we want to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that facilitate gender equality reforms, then we should expand the number of potential cases and thus not concentrate our focus on the politically most interesting cases and/or on the successful cases. By opening up the analysis to include failed reform attempts, the research field is more likely to be able to provide effective tools and good recommendations to allies in the political arena for the feminist cause.

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